



Gunfire in the *Moonlight*

Just before midnight, six armed men slipped through a backyard fence. One man stood between them and a fortune. Dallas Calmes never had a chance — but the details of what happened next would haunt two trials and remain disputed to this day.

Independence, Louisiana · The Night of May 7-8, 1921



It was the sound of boards being pried away from the fence that woke Bessie Calmes first. The back yard was enclosed with a tall wooden barrier, and in the silence of near-midnight, the creak and groan of planks being forced apart sliced right through her sleep. She shook her husband awake and told him what she'd heard. Dallas, who'd been dealing with hobos stealing his chickens lately, wasn't alarmed. Chicken thieves again, he figured. He grabbed his pistol and a lantern, went to the back door, spotted someone in the yard, and stepped outside to confront them.

What happened next took only seconds. Bessie said there was a tremendous, flashing barrage of gunfire — repeated, deafening shots in the clear night air. Then she watched her husband slowly slump to the ground.

"Immediately there was a very loud, flashing barrage of repeated gunfire and she then saw Dallas slowly slump to the ground."

— As recalled by Lawrence Calmes, from Bessie's account

In the bright moonlight, Bessie could see a man firing multiple shots before running away. She also saw additional flashes from a completely different part of the yard — meaning at least two different men had fired from two separate positions. Two witnesses who worked for Dallas and lived in a small apartment at the back of the property had also been awakened by the noise of the fence boards. They confirmed seeing four men enter the yard: two carrying guns, two carrying large canvas satchels. When Dallas came out and shouted, one man — wearing a distinctive hat — opened fire. Shots also came from elsewhere in the yard. Dallas, even as he fell, managed to get off two rounds himself.

Then the men ran. They sprinted back through the gun smoke and the broken fence, raced a block and a half to the waiting Hudson, and the car sped west down Robertson Road into the darkness.

The robbery never happened. The bank was never touched. All that planning, all that intelligence about the vault, all those miles driven from New York and New Orleans — and they never got within twenty feet of the money. Instead, they left behind only a dying man and a screaming wife and three small children who would wake up without a father.

There is a detail here that would haunt the subsequent trials: those two Black witnesses who saw everything — their testimony, if sworn and cross-examined, could have established exactly who fired and who didn't. But they received death

threats from the Mafia almost immediately. They vanished. They were never heard from again. Their initial statements, given that night on the scene, were ruled inadmissible because they could not be cross-examined. Four men's fates would hinge, in part, on this silence.

"What we do know for sure is that only two men actually fired the shots that ended the life of Dallas Calmes. The fact is that no one actually knows which man delivered that fatal shot."

— Rene Calmes, Chief Deputy and brother of Dallas

Dallas Calmes died before morning. His brother Rene, a Chief Deputy who'd rushed to the scene, stood over his body and made a vow: he would see the men who killed his brother face the full force of the law. But he also said something else — something that would put him at odds with the Governor of Louisiana himself: that only two men pulled any triggers that night, and only two men should hang for it.

That distinction — two shooters among six suspects — would become the moral fault line running through everything that followed.

Coming in Post III

The Hudson is speeding away. A nephew wakes up a bootlegger with the fastest car in town. A rope gets thrown over a tree limb. And a Chief Deputy — brother of the dead man — has to physically stop a lynching before the night is over.

The hunt for the six Sicilians had begun, and it would be far from clean.